

Abstract

Colonial trafficking and social engineering: Contextualising international adoption between colonialism and modernity

International adoption, sometimes known as intercountry or transnational adoption, the movement of predominantly non-white adoptees from the non-Western world to white adopters in the West, was born in the mid-1950s in the aftermath of the Korean War. The practice is hitherto involving an estimated number of half a million children, of whom almost one third come from Korea. In the receiving countries, the practice was initiated as a rescue mission with strong Christian undertones, while it came to be perceived as a progressive act of solidarity during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, in the leading adopting regions of North America, Western Europe and Oceania, international adoption has developed into the last resort to have a child for singles and hetero- or homosexual couples suffering from infertility, while a discourse of multiculturalism celebrates international adoptees as bridges between cultures, symbols of interethnic harmony and embodiments of global and postmodern cosmopolitans. On the other hand in the sending countries, international adoption is mostly conceived of as a mixture of a family planning method and a child welfare practice. Despite regular outbursts of criticism towards the practice coming from domestic oppositional circles, most governments in the countries of origin view international adoption as a degrading and humiliating business while they at the same time treat it as a necessary evil, well aware that the practice generates huge amounts of money and sustains a profitable adoption industry.

This study aims to historicise and contextualise international adoption within the double projects of coloniality and modernity by studying the phenomenon from a comparative perspective and by the use of Korea as a case study. This regards both previous and contemporary parallels to international adoption and international adoptees within the context of child and forced migrations. Early predecessors to international adoption and international adoptees in the history of colonialism such as the occasional adoptions of “native” children by frontier settlers, soldiers and missionaries will be looked upon, as well as the controversial transracial adoptions of indigenous and minority children in North America and Australia. Furthermore, comparative studies between international adoption and the forced migrations of the slave and coolie trades and the trafficking in women, and the child migrations of various Western nationals such as British, American, Spanish, Finnish and German children will be made. Lastly, an analysis of the various ideologies, imaginaries and discourses surrounding international adoption and international adoptees will also be conducted. By applying a postcolonial and feminist theoretical perspective and an understanding of the intimate and indivisible relationship between colonial and modernist modes and manners, international adoption is conceptualised as a colonial project of uplifting, civilizing and assimilating non-Western children from the postcolonial world and as a self-disciplining and self-regulating biopolitical technology of power to be able to control women’s bodies and reproduction according to the ideals of modernity and social engineering.

Keywords: international adoption, forced child migration, colonialism, modernity

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